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## Top Secret

# Archives Are Loaded With Classified Papers That Don't Tell Much

## Leaks Can Be the Best Way To Declassify Documents, Some Say; 100 Million Pages Secret Request for Potatoes

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WASHINGTON--The 7,000 pages of the Pentagon's top-secret Vietnam study leaked to the press may seem like quite a heap of secrets. But alongside the military's remaining hoard it's next to nothing.

For instance: Today, almost 26 years after the end of World War II, U.S. archives still hold some 100 million pages of classified war records that remain beyond the public's reach.

Most of the material is probably of little interest to anyone except historians. But the staggering volume of state secrets still under wraps symbolizes an old and thorny issue that is getting new attention as a result of publication of parts of the Vietnam papers. The issue: how and why the government keeps information secret.

One debate in the current controversy centers on the question: "What right does the New York Times have to declassify documents?" But observers in and out of the government say that if you look at past and present government practices it becomes clear that the Times' action is far from unique. The government process of declassification is haphazard and cumbersome, these people say, and they cite many past instances in which high and low officials have leaked various documents as the most practical way to declassify them.

### How to Downgrade

Downgrading and declassification are the responsibility of the official or office that originally classified the document. Current regulations provide for "continuous" review of classified material for these purposes and also call in certain cases for "time-phased" automatic downgrading and declassification.

But Townsend Hoopes, former Under Secretary of the Air Force, maintains that the "vast turnover" of personnel in the upper reaches of the Pentagon means that some classified documents get overlooked because the originator of the material is long gone. Others agree. "If I write a paper and it's classified 'secret,' it will

probably lie there for years," says a Pentagon insider. The Vietnam study, he suspects, "would have been filed away and no one would have looked at it for 20 to 25 years" if the New York Times hadn't laid hands on it.

And the automatic system has gaping loopholes. Under it, each classified document is placed in one of four groups. Two of these categories lead to eventual downgrading or declassification. But the other two groups, often favored by cautious bureaucrats, are exempt from the automatic procedure.

### Kennedy and Johnson

One thing is certain: The present secrecy arrangements do not prevent deliberate leaks that tend to make a mockery of the system. In an affidavit filed in the Washington Post's court struggle against an injunction halting its publication of some of the Pentagon papers, executive editor Benjamin Bradlee recalls that in 1952 when serving as press attache at the U.S. Embassy in Paris, "I was instructed by a superior to leak the contents of a secret cable dealing with a Soviet note to the American government. And I did so, to a correspondent of the United Press."

Early in the bombing campaign of North Vietnam, when the North Vietnamese were claiming that civilian targets in Hanoi were being hit, Cyrus Vance, then Deputy Secretary of Defense, held a lengthy briefing for reporters. During the briefing he described in detail the routes that Navy fighter-bombers were ordered to fly over and around the city, in an effort to prove that civilian targets hadn't been bombed. The routes were classified secret, because they obviously were of interest to North Vietnamese anti-aircraft crews.

The Post's Mr. Bradlee says that when he was a correspondent for Newsweek Magazine, "President John F. Kennedy once read to me portions of a highly classified memorandum of conversation between him and Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna in 1961. I received his permission to use this material."

That's not all. Mr. Bradlee, who has seen the galley proofs of President Lyndon Johnson's forthcoming memoirs, maintains that the book contains considerable amounts of classified information on the Vietnam War. "There's no question about it," he says. "There are several quotations from documents" that are among the parts of the top-secret Vietnam study published in the New York Times.

In many cases, according to the critics, the trouble can be traced to overclassification at the start. One congressional expert, who has tangled repeatedly with the Executive Branch on the problem, insists "the only way things are going to be changed is to make overclassification 'bureaucratically dangerous'—that is, set tough penalties for officials who err on the side of caution.

On Capitol Hill, an effort is on to reform the labyrinthine process by which documents are classified and, sometimes, declassified. Sponsoring legislators would like to make it easier for Congress and the public to get its hands on government records. This week a House Gov-

ernment Operations subcommittee began six days of hearings on the subject. "Everybody's been complaining about the problem of classification for years," says an aide of Pennsylvania's Democratic Rep. William Moorhead, who is chairing the hearings. "Now we're really trying to do something about it."

### The Muskie Plan

One solution is offered by Sen. Edmund Muskie of Maine. He's proposing creation of an independent board empowered to make government documents public after a two-year period. The board would also be authorized "at any time" to "send relevant documents to the appropriate committee of Congress," the Senator says.

Acknowledging the possible adverse impact of disclosure on the government's foreign relations and on the flow of candid advice to the President, a Muskie staffer says a way must be found to insure that "action papers" containing policy decisions are made public while "advisory papers" remain private.

At this point, it's far from certain that any basic reforms will be made in the classification process. Mr. Nixon's decision to make the Pentagon study available to Congress could take some of the steam out of the legislative effort. Congressional insiders see no signs of pressure for change from the influential Appropriations and Armed Services committees. Furthermore, a former Senate staffer says, "a majority of Congressmen don't want to get involved. There's little to be gained politically, and there are dangers in being a guy accused of wanting to 'leak' documents."

Yet if the classification procedures do survive intact, officials concede, it won't be because of the system's efficiency. Administration men admit that both classification and declassification methods could stand improvement. Critics charge that under the current system there's a pervasive tendency to overclassify documents and there's little impetus for declassification.

### A Judgment Matter

Though a 1953 Executive Order attempts to set guidelines for classifying material variously as top secret, secret or confidential, both defenders and critics of the system stress that classification of documents is, in the end, "a judgment matter." And the critics maintain that the judgment usually goes in favor of overclassification because of various pressures at work within the bureaucracy.

For one thing, a desire to avoid trouble with superiors prompts many officials to classify a document that could be safely left unclassified or else give a paper too high a classification.

Frequently, critics charge, information is classified because it is "politically sensitive" and not because its unauthorized disclosure would endanger national security. Thus a veteran Pentagon reporter complains that lists of military bases scheduled for closing have often been classified secret—"until the Pentagon chooses to announce it."